

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

### RABBI AKIBA'S MYSTICAL JOURNEY

The following is one of the most famous stories about Rabbi Akiba: his entrance into "the Orchard" of mystical speculation which can be so very dangerous. Indeed, of the four sages who enter it only one comes out whole. The story comes as a commentary to this mishnah:

The [subject of] forbidden relations may not be expounded in the presence of three nor the work of creation in the presence of two nor [the work of] the chariot in the presence of one, unless he is a sage and understands of his own knowledge. (M. Hagigah 2:1)

These are the rules about studying the more "delicate" subjects of Judaism. The laws of forbidden relations are the rules about incest (Leviticus 18:6-20). If it is studied with many in the group, it was thought, they would be more likely to look upon these rules in a scholarly way rather than a lewd one.

The works of creation, ma'aseh bereishit, is the mystical study of the first chapter of Genesis. Indeed, mystical literature is filled with allusions to this chapter of Genesis. If one wanted to develop a mystical practice, memorizing the first chapter of the book of Genesis, in Hebrew or in English, would be a good way to start.

Studying the works of the chariot is the analysis of Ezekiel's vision of the chariot, described in chapter 1 of his work in which he outlines the fantastic things he has seen in heaven. Ezekiel, who was a priest, sees in the heavens, the Temple as it may have looked to him in the heavenly spheres. The mishnah states that one must understand Ezekiel's description from one's own knowledge. This appears to be something of a code phrase and occurs only here in all of rabbinic literature. At any rate, it appears that one should study these deep mystical matters either by oneself or, at most, with one other person of like understanding. In the Talmud we find out what happens to four sages who attempted to enter the "Garden" or the "Orchard" (in Hebrew, Pardes).

Our Rabbis taught: Four men entered the "Garden", namely Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, Aher and Rabbi Akiba. Rabbi Akiba said to them: When you have arrived at the stones of pure marble say not, "Water, water!". Ben Azzai cast a look and died Ben Zoma looked and became demented Aher mutilated the shoots. Rabbi Akiba departed unhurt. (B. Hagigah/T. Hagigah 2:3-4)

All four of these sages were of the younger group of the second generation of sages (c. 90-130). Let's deal with what happened to each sage in turn. Rabbi Akiba warned them not to look at the marble and say "Water, water!" Fine marble can give the appearance of water. According to B. Baba Batra 4a, the steps of the Temple looked like water even though they were made of marble. Rabbi Akiba was perhaps warning his friends that they were entering the Temple and not to be confused by its other-worldly appearance or by the magnificent things they saw there.

Ben Azzai saw a mystical vision, perhaps Ezekiel's, and immediately died. Perhaps he was so swept up in the heavenly sphere that he wanted to become all soul and abandoned his body so that he could become completely soul and experience the wonders of the mystical realms.

Ben Zoma looked at the mystic wonders and was able to maintain his physical life but his intellectual and spiritual lives were consumed by what he had seen. After this episode, he was unable to carry on normal conversations with people and was always lost in thought, seeing that other world he had visited and seeing the "normal" world through that vision.

Aher, which is the name used for the sage Elisha ben Abuya, left Judaism and became an idol worshipper. Not only that, he became a potent enemy of the Jews since he knew how to strike at the very core of their belief system.

Finally, only Rabbi Akiba is able to enter the mystical world and return in peace.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. The mystical journey is not a universally positive one. Indeed, it can harm some people who make it before they are fully ready. Do you know of examples of such phenomena? What safety guidelines would you suggest for those who are interested in mystical speculation?
2. It is clear that the sages from the Mishnah through the Tosefta and the Bavli were concerned about sages' reactions to mystical speculation. Do you imagine there was some competition between the sages and the mystical circles during this time? Does it reflect any modern tensions? How might they be solved?